

Adult Learners' Perceptions of the Significance of Culture in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

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Received: October 22, 2013 Accepted: November 11, 2013 Online Published: January 24, 2014

doi:10.11114/jets.v2i2.250

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.11114/jets.v2i2.250>

Abstract

Is learning about culture important when learning a foreign language? One would think that after its long history in the field of foreign language teaching this question had been answered with a resounding 'yes'. However, I saw little evidence of this in the classroom when I returned to the university to learn a foreign language or when I began teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). I decided to investigate, and found that while much has been published about the theory of the need for inclusion of culture in foreign language teaching, I was struck by the absence of reports on the study of *learners'* opinions on the issue and resolved to do such a study. Since I had encountered no teaching materials that I felt encompassed the teaching of culture sufficiently, I designed an introductory EFL course specifically for the adult learners I was working. The course centered on intercultural communication and awareness, and I employed it as the 'medium' for qualitative action research to learn about the learners' perceptions of the experience. In this paper I report on their responses to the focus on culture. The research reveals that while the inclusion of culture and the concept of 'learner centering' in foreign language education are recognized in theory, these considerations have not been effectively incorporated into practice. It is hoped that the definitive insights from learners' assessments of the significance of explicitly learning about culture when learning a foreign language will instigate its further inclusion and promote conscious learner centering.

Keywords: action research, foreign language teaching and learning, adult education, culture, intercultural communication, awareness, explicit teaching

1. Introduction

My initial question when I began the research was what adult learners would think of forthright teaching about culture in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. Today it might seem that this question is outdated because of all that has been written about the theory of the necessity for the inclusion of culture in the study of a foreign language, but in my study of the literature I discovered no reports of *learners' responses* to such teaching. I wondered if this might be a reflection of my observation that while there has been some progress towards the inclusion of culture in foreign language teaching it has been limited, and generally, culture is only hinted at, and that in such a fragmented, disconnected manner as to make meaningful learning about culture improbable.

I became aware of this in my experience as an adult learner in the foreign language classroom, and as an EFL teacher I became critical of the deficiency of information about culture in the materials I was expected to employ. After deciding to confront the issue I wrote an introductory course for EFL specifically for the adult learners I was working with at two universities in central Mexico. Wishing to learn about their perceptions of the course, I employed it as the 'medium' for classroom-based research, and the data collected were reports written by the learner-participants about their perceptions of their experience of the course. The insights that emerged from the data are arresting, I think are especially so because they come from the viewpoint of *learners*, not from theory or, as in most reported classroom research, from the teacher or researcher's observation of learners' reactions.

In this article I discuss what I consider to be the most intriguing of the participants' remarks about their experience of forthright teaching and learning about culture in the EFL classroom, offering my interpretations and assessments as to their relevance for language education. Several other themes emerged as having been noteworthy to participants, several of which are discussed in papers listed under Brooks-Lewis in the Reference section below.

2. Literature Review

The issue of the inclusion of culture in foreign language teaching arguably began with the writings of Malinowski in 1923 after Sapir, an anthropologist-linguist, declared that "...language does not exist apart from culture." (Sapir, 1921, p. 206). However, this had little impact in language education until the 1970s, with a principle of the 'communicative revolution' that "...language teaching should take greater account of the way that language worked in the real world and try to be more responsive to the needs of learners in their efforts to acquire it." (Howatt, 2004, p. 326) A precept of the resulting communicative approach to language teaching was to address the learner's need not only for learning grammar but for being able "...to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways." (Byram *et al.*, 2002, p. 4) This would require making culture an integral part of language education, as opposed to the traditional view that learning about culture, as Byram (1989, p. 18) put it, is nothing more than "...a beneficial spin-off from pure language teaching." This view endures, as: "Current 'communicative' methods of second language teaching generally view language as a means of bridging an 'information gap'." (Corbett, 2003, p. 1)

There have been developments in addressing the issue, as are skillfully considered in Ahanasoulas' paper (2001) for instance, but the communicative approach, with its focus on the 'four language skills' being the order of the day, the assumption continues that learners will instinctively learn about culture and somehow 'naturally' learn to use the language appropriately. However, as Widdowson (2003, p. 24) suggests, "...this seems unlikely with the kind of rudimentary transactions frequently set as the objective of communicative language teaching." It would seem that this restriction was what the communicative revolution was revolting against, but culture continues to be neglected, if not purposefully avoided (Kim, 2002, p. 27). At best, cultural content is included obliquely, in 'capsules' that "...provide students with little material. Even when culturally authentic materials are implemented...they typically appear only on the periphery and are rarely used to reveal significant features of the target culture." (Maxim, 2000, p. 13) Today, in the attempt to represent the diversity of cultures where the target language is spoken there is no target culture; instead, allusions to various cultures are depicted, which is not only confusing but can promote little learning about any of them. It also trivializes the role of culture in language and communication.

In addition to helping the learner understand how to use the language appropriately, teaching about culture in language education acknowledges the complexity of learning another language. In response, the recognition of the learner as an individual is essential, because as the Council of Europe (2001, p. 1) notes: "Communication calls upon the whole human being...", and thus the learner's identity, including her or his interests, needs, experience and prior knowledge, must be taken into account. This would seem essential to the presently popular idea of 'learner-centered' teaching, but previous research (Sercu *et al.*, 2005, p. 491) shows that: "An important number of the cultural topics touched upon in the foreign language classroom appear to be far removed from what learners already understand and know about the foreign culture in focus." The report goes on to explain that "...traditional approaches to culture teaching appear to persevere...not worrying too much about whether this body of information is relevant to learners or can help forward their learning process." (ibid., p. 494) Why would information that is not relevant to the learners be presented? And what is the purpose of education other than helping to forward the learning process?

Developments in including culture and the recognition of the learner in language education continue, and an intercultural approach to language teaching has brought progress with a more thorough integration of culture with the understanding that "...culture is the core of language learning/acquisition." (Lange *et al.*, 1998, p. ii, original emphasis) This approach is not a 'revolution' in which previous methods are overthrown but builds upon them, especially on methods of the communicative approach, in the effort to reach meaningful and realistic goals (Corbett, 2003, p. 4). These goals include teaching towards the awareness of learning, language, culture, and their interrelationship in communication, the awareness of other cultures, of other people and of self in the promotion of intercultural reflection and understanding.

3. Methodology of the Research

The methodology of the research discussed herein is qualitative, and exemplifies the observation that "...the styles of scientific research vary almost as much as human personalities." (Watson 1968, p. ix) It concurs with Denzin and Lincoln's (1998, p. 3) description of qualitative research being "...multimethod in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter." The research I undertook comprises factors of several qualitative methods, some of which have coinciding principles.

Action research is the predominant method in the research, highlighted by the plan/act/observe/reflect cycle which I maintained by observing, noticing what I felt to be problems, reflecting upon them, making a plan in response, and acting upon it. Another hallmark of action research is to bring about change, which is what I hope to do by sharing the results of the research. I was both the teacher and the researcher, a complex position that in action research is seen as being "...a way to bridge the gap between theory and practice." (Noffke, 1997) Action research is also a joining of "...researchers

and research participants into a single community of interested colleagues” (Winters in Richards, 2003, p. 237), a notion that defines my attitude and methodology. Also essential for me is that action research offers immediate rewards for everyone concerned: the students for the thought-provoking experiences of doing something different and of being involved in research, and for the teacher/researcher it “...goes beyond mere discovery and embeds the findings of the research in a process of professional self-discovery and development.” (ibid.) I hope that others will take up this research, because as a case study, it “...is ‘strong in reality’ and therefore likely to appeal to practitioners, who will be able to identify with the issues and concerns raised...” (Nunan, 1992, p. 78) I would suggest that many of the ideas can be applied in teaching other languages and in other situations.

My purpose in the research was to learn about learner-participants’ perceptions of their experience of it, involving the methodology of constructivism in sharing “...the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it.” (Richards, 2003, p. 3) My own experiences were fundamental to the process, which is a factor of narrative research methodology, as: “One of the starting points for narrative inquiry is the researcher’s own narrative of experience.” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 70) The subjectivity involved is appreciated in qualitative research, and the researcher is recognized as “...a resource, which must be capitalized upon.” (Holliday, 2002, p. 145) My involvement as both teacher and researcher was necessary, but even so I felt the need for ‘decentering’, as Heshusius and Ballard (1996, p. 173) describe it in interpretivism as the effort to ‘step outside one’s self’ in working towards the suspension of beliefs, preconceptions, of ‘being the knower’, of being open to seeing and imagining possibilities. This effort was not an attempt to simulate objectivity because: “The claim to objectivity implicit in the representation of quantitative outcomes and explicit in experimental research allows the researcher to stand aside from the findings, but this is not an option in qualitative inquiry.” (Richards, 2003, p. 9) My only attempt to stand aside from the findings of this research is to present them as concisely as possible so that readers may form their own decisions as to their relevance.

4. Context of the Research

I obtained permission from the authorities at the two public (state funded) universities in central Mexico where I was teaching to undertake the research with the groups I had been assigned. The students were all Spanish-speaking adults with varying levels of English and ages ranging from 19 to 72, the majority being at the lower end.

On the first meeting with each group I invited the students to participate in the research, and acceptance was unanimous. I did not share the research questions with the participants, only explaining that the research was about EFL teaching and learning and that the course would be ‘different’. I did not describe the differences in order to avoid influencing their responses – I did not want to ‘give the game away’, as Richards (2003, p. 123) put it.

The duration of the course was intended to be 30 classroom hours but was frequently longer, as questions and open discussions were encouraged and accommodated at the learners’ discretion. The same process and content were maintained when working with all of the groups.

4.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Three types of written data were collected: questionnaires, copies of learning diaries, and essays. The writers’ anonymity protected throughout because my goal was to discover *what* people wrote about their experience of the research, not *who* wrote what. (The latter might be interesting information, and I suggest that it could be taken up in further research.)

We discussed the keeping of a learning diary, and I recommended that it be kept in Spanish for freedom of expression, explaining that at the end of the course I would ask for an essay written in English based on their diary. (The reasons for this were both for the learners to review their learning experience and to have practice in writing in English.) At the end of the course with each group I requested and received unanimous permission from the participants to take copies of their diaries and essays for data, and questionnaires were administered. I, accord with qualitative action research, I wished to collect “...an archive of material rich enough to admit subsequential reinterpretation.” (Doty, 2003), both my own and others’.

The method of collecting written data was elected over others for several reasons. Primarily, as mentioned above, while subjectivity is acknowledged as being an element of qualitative methodology, I judged that a manner of ‘distancing’ myself would be through collecting written data. Interviews were not conducted for this reason also – I envisioned that the learner-participants would find it impossible to ‘separate’ the teacher from the researcher, making it difficult for them to express themselves freely. Observation was not employed because the intent of the research was “...to discover and interpret meaning from the respondents’ rather than the researcher’s perspective.” (Manning 1997:98), as pointed out earlier

Every step of the analysis process was subjective. This was qualitative research and involved interpretivism, wherein “...one of the key realizations... [is] that there is no special method or set of procedures that allows researchers to

penetrate appearances to discover how things really are.” (Smith, 1996, p.165) My claims are based on conscientious analysis and careful consideration, but I openly acknowledge that I am *interpreting* the participants’ comments, which is a subjective process. Also engaged, both in this writing and in the research, are an ‘embodied mode of discourse’ and the disavowal of the attempt to separate ‘interior and exterior modes of knowing’ (Heshusius and Ballard, 1996, p. 14). As a reflection of this, the style of presentation is at times intentionally personalized.

4.2 An Outline of the ‘Medium’ of the Research

The course was designed as an introduction to the study of EFL. Even though all of the students had studied English previously (as it is a requirement in secondary and high schools in Mexico), I wondered if a re-introduction as an *adult* learner might be beneficial in promoting awareness on several levels. With regard to the aspect of the inclusion and incorporation of culture in foreign language teaching, the types of awareness aimed for are of self, of language and culture, and their interrelationship in communication. I imagined that such a process would require teaching about culture on two levels: culture-specific, the study of a particular culture, and culture-general, which treats of “...the larger issues of ethnocentrism, cultural self-awareness, and general adaptation strategies.” (Bennett, 1996, p. 20) Both of these were crucial in the course, as a fundamental goal was to help learners develop “...a greater degree of tolerance toward other cultures and [to be] able to confront and begin to overcome their cultural prejudices and stereotypes.” (Lantolf, 1999, p. 29) The American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Language (2006) suggests the comparison of the learner’s culture and first language with those under study, and as I had found that contrast was also beneficial, both were constant threads throughout the course. Many of these principles which were incorporated into the course are clearly illustrated, for example, in Thanasoulas, 2001.

Because the focus of this paper is learners’ perceptions of the significance of culture in language learning, here I will give a synopsis of how culture was engaged in the course. (A more complete description can be found in Brooks-Lewis, 2007.) The introduction of culture began with a summarized (hi)story of the English language to familiarize the learners with the language. Then discussions of a specific culture where the English language is spoken (the U.S.) were initiated (culture-specific). This country was elected because the course was designed specifically for Mexican adults, and I felt that looking at its culture(s) would be most relevant for the learners since they are neighbors. I pointed out that there is no ‘one’ culture in any country, but as the US has been built upon cultural diversity we would look at ‘core concepts’ of the culture. I described how English got to the United States (U.S.) in a brief account of the (hi)story of the country, and overviews of the systems of government and education, principal holidays, etc. lead to discussions of cultural values important in the U.S., such as privacy, independence, individuality, and family life. A day in the life of someone with a 9-5 job (common working hours in the U.S.) was then considered. The variance in cultural concepts of time and space was discussed in illustrating how these concepts affect life-views and relationships between people (culture-general), and examples of these variances were made with the comparison and contrast of U.S. and Mexican cultures (culture-specific).

Expressions of courtesy were taken up, with titles and customs of naming being discussed (culture-general), especially the latter, because this practice is very different in American and Mexican cultures (culture-specific). The communicative element of body language was deliberated upon, as this is essential to communication and is a culturally developed mode of expression, and is again very different in the U.S. and Mexico. This helped spotlight the need for conscious ‘noticing’ (awareness), along with that for acceptance and understanding of difference and making mistakes, both one’s own and others’, in intercultural communication.

5. Learners’ Perceptions of the Significance of Culture in Language Learning

In the following I present excerpts from the data and discuss my interpretations of their meaning, or implication, and insights they offer for adult language education. Learners’ perceptions of the significance of culture in language learning in their experience of straightforward discussions about it were enlightening, and at times even sublime. The data I have included here stood out for me because they express both *why* learners considered teaching and learning about culture in studying language to be important and *how* the experience affected them.

Quotations from the data are italicized to differentiate them from those taken from other sources, and are included not only as evidence but to permit further interpretation. The learning diaries and questionnaires were written in Spanish, which I have translated, but the essays were written in English. As the data collected were anonymous I have cited quotations from it with a letter to indicate the data type – learning diary (D), essay (E), or questionnaire (Q) – followed by the number assigned to each piece of data.

5.1 Culture is Significant in Foreign Language Study

The breadth and depth of participants’ responses to explicitly learning about culture in the foreign language classroom are incisive and sometimes astonishing. In addition to the responses to learning about the foreign culture, I found it

surprising how many made reference to how learning about another culture had helped learners to become aware of their native culture.

Beginning with commentaries about why learning about culture was necessary in learning another language, one participant succinctly elucidated his or her opinion that: “*Without culture any language is senseless.*” (E104) Someone else indicated an understanding of the relationship of culture and language: “*I think that if you take an English course and do not talk about culture you are missing the main idea of what a language is.*” (E12) These learners unmistakably voice the need for explicit teaching about culture in language education, and another remark indicates that this is a good beginning point:

I enjoy my class because I am studying more than a language (grammar, structure, verbs...), I'm studying a culture...Unless you know basic facts and customs about the country where the language you are learning is spoken, you cannot feel sure about your knowledge. (E16, original indices)

Knowledge is to be built upon, and learning about culture is indicated in offering a broad foundation for horizons to be built towards in language learning.

There were also explanations of why becoming critically aware of culture is important. An understanding of the concept of identity was brought out in a participant's writing that “*...culture gives people their identity and shows us how they are and why they are like they are.*” (E31) A variation of this in another response plainly calls for the establishment of reflection on culture: “*It is important to know that other cultures have their own identity, customs and traditions.*” (Q166) One might expect a university student to know this, but the comment shows that a teacher must not take a student's prior knowledge for granted.

In intercultural communication: “An intercultural speaker is aware of both their own and others' culturally constructed selves.” (Roberts et al. 2001:30). In the research results, comparison and contrast of the learner's culture with other cultures was found to be a manner of promoting self-awareness, as seen in such responses as: “*Learning about other cultures I am getting to know my own.*” (Q157), and: “*I think talking about the English-speaking cultures helped us open our minds to other customs and other ways of thinking and learning them...Also, comparing them with Mexican culture permitted us an enriching appreciation of our own culture.*” (Q126) If only the target culture(s) were discussed and comparison and contrast with the learner's culture were not made, such appreciation of difference and self might go unnoticed.

Teaching about culture, and doing so explicitly when working with adults, is imperative because “...intercultural competence is not a ‘natural’ or ‘automatic’ result of foreign language teaching.” (Meyer 1990:157) A participant went to some length to explain the value of actual teaching and learning about the ‘background’ of the language being learned:

There are so many things we have never stopped to think about when we are learning a language. For instance, body language, customs, traditions, holidays, etc. and nobody speaks about that kind of thing. All of them form the identity of the people and all of these have a background, and when you put them together, you have an idea of their particular perception of living. When you know the reasons, rules, etc. of how things became what they are, you understand the people, and you become more human, because sometimes we think we live on an island, alone...How are we going to grow if we do not learn from others? (E35)

Overt culture learning was perceived to encourage the expansion of cultural awareness and the recognition of other realities, which are neither ‘natural’ nor ‘automatic’ intellectual processes. The participants' question was excellent, and could be rephrased for teachers, researchers and for language education overall: How are we going to improve if we do not learn from learners?

5.2 The Novelty of ‘Going beyond’ the Language

The mention of the novelty of learning about culture in an EFL course is seen above and is frequent in the data, although it is to be remembered that all of the participants had a minimum of two years' experience in the EFL classroom. In criticizing her or his former language learning experience a participant wrote: “*Teachers almost never think that it is important that when you are learning another language, in this case English, to go beyond learning vocabulary, memorizing expressions, grammar rules, verbs, etc.*” (E117) It would seem that the structuralist view of language teaching was what this learner, along with the majority of those who participated in the research, had been exposed to, although the communicative approach had been extremely popular in Mexico for several years.

Other examples of comments about the novelty the participants felt for explicitly learning about culture are: “*It is agreeable to work with cultural aspects because they give meaning to the language. These aspects were never taken into account in my other English courses.*” (Q154), and one learner wrote of how culture is often ‘forgotten’ in

language classes: *"The first weeks of class we talked about and examined the fact that a language is a part of a culture. This is something extremely important but it is unfortunate how many language professors forget to mention the fact."* (E12) I do not think language professors 'forget' to mention culture; but once again, as it is not brought out in the materials usually employed it is usually not considered. Another participant's comment indicates that having experienced such teaching was new and appealing: *"I have loved this way of starting. I thought we were just going to memorize and nothing more. Now my panorama is different and my mind is open to discover and understand other forms of culture, and not to judge before knowing."* (D97) This learner's prior classroom experience appears to have been of grammar-translation because of the expectation of 'memorizing and nothing more', and I interpret the mention of a change in 'panorama' to refer not only to the way of approaching language learning but to progress in intercultural understanding.

While perceptions of the inclusion of culture expressed in the data were almost all positive, there were commentaries that demonstrated discord. One person seems to have had difficulty relating learning about culture to language learning: *"It seemed to me very suitable for learning at least a minimum of general culture...However, I personally believe that perhaps one class would have been enough for the introduction, and to initiate the grammar sooner, thus accelerating our learning a little."* (E2) Possibly the process did not concur with this person's learning style, or was the belief that grammar teaching was the only method was so entrenched that nothing else would be acceptable? Another participant expressed impatience with the process:

In the beginning I did not like the English class because I thought we were wasting our time with all these things, but after the first class I loved it because before all these explications about English I really hated it and I was studying it only because I needed it. However, now I have started to like English because now I understand a little more about its origins and its culture...Now I know the "why" of many things in English. (E118)

In the end, 'going beyond' English with learning about culture apparently altered this participant's attitude not only towards the language but towards its learning. This is a substantial result, as the essence of teaching is to inspire students to learn.

5.3 Facing Fears and Gaining Confidence

A report on previous research (Paige *et al.* 1999) notes researchers' repeated reference to language students' fear of being 'absorbed' by the culture of the language they are studying. This was indicated in the analyses of the data I collected, and a discovery was participants' perception that openly discussing language and culture learning had been advantageous in allaying these fears. An instance of this is:

The most important lesson that I learned at this time was that when we learn other languages we must not lose our identity or change it for other customs or traditions. We must appreciate our culture, our country, our traditions, our family more and the other things that we have and make us different and special. (E118)

Discussing fears of language and culture learning had evidently been not only a comfort but to have promoted self-appreciation.

Fear of the unknown is another aspect of language learning that emerged from the data, in this case involving the unknown of other people and cultures: *"Sometimes people are scared of different cultures because they do not understand them, limiting themselves and forgetting to become sensitive to different cultures. I think that this not only applies to cultures, it applies to everything."* (E12) Lack of knowledge was seen to be the problem, one which upfront learning about other cultures helped to confront. The need for empathy is also indicated here, as: "Understanding develops most effectively when learners are ready to open up to others, discovering common fears and hopes, similarities, and differences." (Jackstädt and Müller-Hartmann, 2001, p. 118-9) The comparison and contrast of the learner's culture with the target culture(s) advances this understanding, and as another participant wrote, it helped to know *"...that a person is not learning something inhuman but of people that use another language and have other customs."* (D78) The relation of what is being learned to a known reality having aided in building confidence was noted by another: *"I have been able to see that knowing about other people, their customs and traditions that with all their successes and mistakes they are not from another planet. This gives me confidence for learning the language."* (Q61) Confidence building, I believe, is the crux of language teaching, and finding that learners considered that teaching and learning about culture contributes to building confidence was extremely noteworthy.

5.4 Revision of Stereotypes

The revision of stereotypical thinking due to culture-specific learning was perceived by participants to have been a decisive factor in the research. This augments the theory that: "Stereotypes are best avoided by providing learners with

a careful balance between culture-general frameworks and culture-specific information.” (Smith *et al.*, 1998, p. 67). As a result of such a teaching process, a learner-participant said: “*I learned new things, corrected others and broke through some paradigms and prejudices.*” (Q183) Learning means change in ways of thinking, and these results show how teaching and learning about other cultures in the language classroom can encourage constructive changes in thinking.

There were many references to changing paradigms and perceptions that emerged from the data. Some of the most striking were about gains in recognition, understanding and acceptance of equality of languages, cultures and people, such as: “*Even though we have a different culture and we speak in a different form, we are all human beings.*” (E4), and “*I now consider that we are all equal, we are human beings with different ideas and manners of seeing things.*” (Q126) Another participant stated that through the experience of forthright teaching about culture: “*I learned more about equality, justice and other cultural values in general.*” (Q151), and someone else seemed to have been sincerely moved by his or her experience of intellectual change, writing: “*I have learned about the EQUALITY of HUMAN BEINGS, and confirmed a philosophy of life which is congruent and has broken all the schemas you can imagine in my interior.*” (D103, original emphasis) These reports of positive changes in attitudes and beliefs and of learners’ developing self and intercultural understanding are remarkable, and I think the learners’ recognition of their own intellectual growth is estimable.

As explained above, the course that was the ‘medium’ for the research was written with the learners in mind, one aspect being the election of U.S. culture as the target culture. This election was made because I imagined it might be relevant for the learners, and because the history between the U.S. and Mexico has been fraught with difficulties, with Mexico routinely coming out the loser. Anti-U.S. sentiment therefore runs high in Mexico, making learning not only about the culture but also the language of the dominant country emotionally charged undertakings. As one participant explained:

The situation is not easy because we have social resentments against the “North American” culture. These are based on prejudice, partial knowledge and historical facts, and as emotions are part of the culture, they also structure subjectivities. However, we must somehow put aside these grievances and work with these contradictions if we really want to learn English. (D79)

Emotions affect learning, and as this learner points out, if one has negative feelings for a culture it affects the learning of the language spoken, signaling the need for realistic culture teaching and discussion.

Becoming critically conscious of one’s viewpoint and ‘knowledge’ of another culture is important for learning the language spoken within it, as a participant remarked:

I identified a lot with the talk of today, because I really had and maybe still have a bad concept of the culture of the U.S.A. but I think we must not judge and generalize something without knowing it. I also think that if we really want to learn the language we also have to learn to respect its culture. (D107)

There is evidence of internalization of intercultural concepts, and the learner’s specifying that respect for others is a vital was reported in prior research: “Intercultural communication is communication on the basis of respect for individuals and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction.” (Byram *et al.*, 2002, p. 5) Another comment related learning about culture to learning respect: “*The significance of learning about the cultures behind English helped us to value other cultures a little more, to respect them...*” (Q134). Coming to the realization that other cultures have value is a critical step in learning to respect others and for intercultural understanding, and this was not easy for some participants with reference to U.S. culture.

Today we had an interesting talk about American culture. I learned that the culture of the Americans is different but is as valid as any other culture. Maybe it is difficult for us as Mexicans to accept all those ideas because on many occasions they have taken advantage of our people, but the teacher is right in that if someone wants to be respected, first they have to respect and not wait to be respected before respecting. (D108)

It is difficult to become empathetic and to respect another culture if there have been problems between it and one’s own, but as this and other participants elucidated, prejudices can be overcome. Discussions about culture were challenging, and provided a good test for intercultural teaching and learning.

Culture-specific discussions were perceived to have encouraged reflection on one’s own thinking processes, and a participant testified to having made a change in their view of nationality: “*My ideas about Americans have changed a lot as I have been permitted to know them a little better as human beings without thinking of nationalities.*” (Q100) Another disclosed how learning about another culture had helped to modify her or his stereotypical thinking:

I have revised my ideas about Americans a little, although I continue to think that they are racists, the majority – before I thought they all were. I was anti-gringo and now I see that they are not all the same and more than anything, they are human beings. (Q67)

Prejudices are difficult to discard, and some are more closely held than others, but a step such as this can begin the process. Other participants demonstrated a more far-reaching beginning: *"I agree...about stereotypes because they make it easy to say and think that everyone in the United States is the same and really we cannot say this because we do not know all of the people."* (D113) Some changes in prejudicial thinking were not limited to the target culture but were more extensively intercultural: *"My ideas about the American people have changed...since you told us about the culture there I really stopped prejudging people I do not know anything about."* (E6) Changing outlooks was once again reported to have begun with appreciation of difference:

I can now see that it was not how I thought about the way of being and acting of the people that live in the United States of America. I can now see that every society and culture has its peculiarities and similarities with others, and it is clear that none is better or worse, they are only different. (D86)

Indications from these commentaries are that culture-specific learning can promote awareness and revision of stereotypical thinking, in overcoming prejudice, appreciating equality, and of understanding the need for respect for other cultures and individuals. Also remarkable is that understanding of similarity was deemed to have been beneficial.

Going a step beyond revision of stereotypes, in my research of the literature I came across the idea that: *"The intercultural learner ultimately serves as a mediator between different social groups that use different languages and language varieties."* (Corbett, 2003, p. 2). I was therefore amazed by the remarkable similarity of this learner-participant's reflection:

Bilingual people have the moral obligation to be the bridge between cultures, and learning as much as we can about each other's culture prepares us to develop better relationships and to get rid of misconceptions and stereotypes created by the lack of realistic information about each other. (E29)

The seriousness and clarity of this person's observation is striking, and more so from the language learning aspect because the data is from an essay, which was written in English.

5.5 Tolerance and Acceptance of Difference

One is often so fixed in one's own culture that other possibilities are unimaginable, and learning about other cultures was perceived by participants to have helped them to step out of the known: *"To know about a different way of life than my own is moving because one lives tied to one's own interests and thinks that everyone else is and thinks the same."* (D124) Someone else wrote:

We only have to learn the most important thing, that no language is better than any other, there are simply differences that we are not accustomed to. We must give ourselves the task of getting it into our heads that our way of seeing life is not the same for everyone and to accept differences and get to know them. (D87)

The growth of tolerance and acceptance of difference is recurrent in the data, as is the concept of 'opening the mind'. The practice of comparing and contrasting cultures was perceived to have been important in this development: *"The comparing of cultures helped to make us tolerant and sensitive for accepting the diverse ways of thinking, speaking and living that exist in the world."* (Q129) Put a bit differently, another participant wrote:

Knowing about a culture where English is spoken and the comparison with our culture sensitizes the student a little to not be so closed in their way of thinking. It also helps us learn that there is a diversity of customs and that just because they are different does not mean one is better than the other. (Q147)

The repetition of the idea of no culture being 'better' than any other suggests that this impression had been compelling, and correlates with the recognition of the equality of human beings reported above.

Learning about a particular culture was also seen by the adult learners to promote cultural-general understanding: *"The truth is that I did not think that life was like that in the United States. I had another idea but now I think that the world is like a coin purse that has all kinds of money in it, each saving a little of our forefathers and I am now learning the why of everything."* (D74) Accommodation of the adult learner's need to 'learn the why' of things is, or should be I believe, a defining factor of adult education.

6. Conclusion

Research participants' perceptions of the significance of culture in language learning were overwhelmingly positive. Learners' expressions of high esteem are astute in their explanations of how and why they felt that learning about culture in the foreign language classroom is essential, beginning with the fundamental understanding that culture gives language meaning. Frank discussions of culture were seen as a way of 'going beyond' language and the traditional practice of working with grammar rules and vocabulary, and were reported to have made the learning experience memorable and enjoyable. Participants explained that the comparison and contrast with their own culture had been

instrumental in promoting awareness by helping them to become aware of culture, of how culture affects thinking and behavior, of giving them insights into why others act and react as they do, of instigating an 'enriching appreciation' of their own culture, and of helping to allay fears of 'losing' their identity or devaluing their own when learning another language and about other cultures.

Learner-participants indicated that with culture-general learning the interrelationship of culture, language, and identity became clear, along with the understanding of how all of these are factors inherent in communication. This learning also inspired confidence through the appreciation of difference and the acceptance of sameness, helped learners to change their unrealistic perceptions of others, and brought about a sense of empathy and respect for other people and other cultures. Reversals of prejudice and the tendency to judge others without knowing them were noted to have engendered the appreciation of equality, both individual and cultural.

Observations of straight-forward culture-specific teaching and learning reflected sentiments similar to those about culture-general teaching and learning, but were particularly enlightening with respect to the resistance the learners admitted having originally felt towards the target culture and how this had changed. Significant in the data is learners' portrayal of their internalization of the understanding that culture is comprised of individual people, of their recognition and revision of their own stereotypical thinking, even of having learned to look beyond nationality. Participants commented that they had learned that the first steps in learning another language and about other cultures are to 'put aside grievances', to overcome prejudices, to have tolerance and respect for different culture(s) and people who speak different languages. Discussions about values and beliefs of others and the comparison and contrast with their own were perceived to have made it possible to see people who speak other languages, and those who speak the target language in particular, as 'real' people.

The object of the research was not to produce new materials for language teaching, and the intent of the course which was the 'medium' of the research is not original – it puts into practice many previously recognized ideas. The purpose of the research was to build upon these ideas and add to them in the interest of furthering the progressive movement in language education, with a special focus on the concept of learner-centered education. The research itself was learner-centered, as the aim was to learn about *learners'* impressions of the ideas and process of the course. Learner-centering is also evident in the employment of action research as the methodology, with its deliberate involvement of the learner and the goal of reporting on the research in the continuation of the cycle of action research.

In the process of this research several suggestions for further research arose. For instance, because of the established programs at the universities where the research was undertaken it was not possible to present the course independently, and it would be interesting to learn if learners' perceptions would be different if this were done. Different research methods could be used, and having at least two researchers is advised. The latter would bring different perspectives to the analysis of the data, other data analysis processes could be devised, and the concern about subjectivity could be lessened. Having more than one researcher would also provide the opportunity to collect different types of data, such as from personal interviews and/or tracking learners over a period of time, both of which are highly recommended. The focuses of the course were EFL teaching and learning and Spanish-speaking adult learners at the university level in Mexico, and I suggest that the research could be replicated, with adequate modification, for working with learners of different ages, levels of education, those coming to English from other languages, for those in other countries, and with the teaching and learning of other languages.

The results of the research are far-reaching in 'going beyond' in foreign language teaching with explicit teaching about culture. this goal of an intercultural approach is to promote both personal and social change, as Corbett (2003:212) explains: "It would be facile to suggest that intercultural language education alone can make people kinder, more tolerant and open. However, if adopted more widely, it may offer a modest contribution to that process." A participant's comment that closely paralleled an idea of Corbett's was reviewed above, and another participant confirmed this one, showing that learning about other cultures fosters respect, which is necessary if conflict is to be superseded by communication: "*I think every country, every city, every town, has their own culture, their own traditions, and we have to respect them. If we learn to respect other cultures different from ours, we would not have wars.*" (E146) The endorsement of intercultural language education indicated here is decidedly persuasive.

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